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TALKS WITH ARTISTS.

INDIVIDUALITY IN ART.

A CONVERSATION WITH WILLIAM HART.

I VERY greatly enjoy visiting my artist friends in their studios, and engaging in conversation with them concerning their art while they continue their painting and allow me to feel that I am not an intruder. Very, very often have I wished, when it was too late, that I could recall some of these pleasant talks, in their entirety, for I have felt that they might be as interesting to others as they always are to me.

This afternoon, I dropped into William Hart's studio, in Twenty-third street, and while Mr. Hart called several cattle into the foreground of one of his characteristic landscapes, I enjoyed watching him work and hearing him talk at the same time. From a conversation at first general and disconnected, we drifted into a talk about Individuality in Art; and as it is only a little while since I left the studio, I shall endeavor to jot down something of our conversation while I still remember it vividly. It began in this way:

"I am often asked," said Mr. Hart, "my opinion regarding the ability of some young person recently returned from a course of art study abroad,—a person, possibly, who has sent home works which seem to argue the possession of the most decided talent, but which do not sufficiently indicate to me whether the talent belongs to the student or to the master under whom he has studied. To such questions I invariably answer that we must wait for awhile and see how this apparent genius survives a few years of absence from the master. Our young friend is, at present, a mere grub in the chrysalis state, and what color the butterfly is to be is something that I feel is beyond my power to foretell.

"I do not find fault with the young painter for being influenced by his master; he must copy him to a great extent to learn from him; but after he has learned the principles that can be taught, it is time for him to set out for himself and modify and supplement what he has learned by the impressions he derives individually from Nature. It was well to imitate the master at the outset, but it does not follow that that is to be the end and aim of the learner's existence.

"In learning to draw correctly,—and I consider correct drawing the most necessary basis for a thorough art education,—the student must most carefully imitate that which he sees. As a student, he is not at first called upon to originate; he is expected to imitate and to obtain proficiency as an imitator; but, after this, he must look about him to discover the spirit that is in things, and to interpret to us what Nature discloses to him. This interpretation he must give us in his own

language, and we shall value it in proportion as it possesses strength, directness, truth and beauty. To please the highest sense, it should be refined as well as vigorous—and I assure you that a picture can possess both strength and refinement despite what some of the self-assumed critics may say. Strength does not necessarily imply brutality, boorishness or crudity, nor does refinement of necessity indicate weakness; the two exist together in the best pictures as in the best people.

"But an artist, all through his art life, must keep up the imitative part also. He must exercise himself constantly in the almost merely mechanical matter of drawing, in order best to express this spirit he finds in nature. An artist is always a student."

"What would be your definition of Individuality in Art, Mr. Hart?"

"Individuality I should term the expression of the nature of the artist himself in his work. The strong man, as a student, will display evidences of himself in his work, even though the same work contains much that is characteristic of his master. His work will not so literally reproduce that which his master places before him, perhaps, as will the work of a man of less talent but greater imitative ability. For that reason, persons are apt to make great mistakes in estimating the relative talents of art students. The man who draws most literally is not, by any means, necessarily the strongest man in a school, but he who succeeds in appreciating and incorporating the spirit of what he attempts to reproduce into his work, is the man who displays the most evident promise. The imitative faculty, as I have said, is an important element in the artist, but one that is of small value compared with the creative faculty. A monkey is a close imitator, but a monkey does not invent anything. An artist must be able to imitate, but he must be able to do a great deal more, and as he does more, he displays the individuality that distinguishes him from other men, and we enjoy his work because it is different from that of other men.

"Thackeray and Dickens are authors whose writings we enjoy, because they are so true to nature; but beyond that there is a great charm in the difference of the styles of the two men. We love Dickens, we love Thackeray, and yet the men are not at all alike. And it is not so much what they tell us as their inimitable way of telling it that we delight in; not so much the books as the men themselves displaying their characteristics to us through their books. And so, in art, the artist's mind, as shown through his work, is much more fascinating to us than the work itself.

"And in the matter of technique, no two men should be expected to paint alike any more than they should be expected to think, or write, or feel, or look alike. No two men are alike. As to the best technique, that is best for a man which enables him to express his own feeling of Nature best. A man may see Nature very

broadly, or with an eye to the most minute details, and he should paint exactly as he sees. It would not do for Jean Francois Millet to try to paint like Gerome, nor may Gerome attempt to paint after the manner of Millet. Either of these men is a great master in his way, and is great because individual, and—one might say—intrinsically great in his Nature. I shall not say that one of them is greater than the other, but I may prefer one to the other, because he sees Nature, more nearly as I see her, or because he has a fashion of showing me those effects which I admire most in Nature in a manner that, to me, is particularly charming.

"To one who is forming an art collection, this difference—this individuality of artists—comes forward in full force; this personal nature is felt in its greatest degree. To me Corot is charming by comparison. Let us compare him with, say, Constable. There is a masculine character in Constable's work that is positively wonderful, while in Corot's pictures we see more of the sweet, gentle, feminine influence. Corot paints with a peculiar strength, too; for, if you notice, his pictures may hang in a gallery in the midst of the most vigorously painted figure pieces, yet they have a strength—a sustaining power—that is marvelous, and shows the innate power of the master behind that dreamy, poetic feeling that is so conspicuous in his work. I greatly admire both Corot and Constable. Constable was not appreciated in his own country, but in France his works were received with the greatest favor, and caused almost a revolution in French art. You may see that Rousseau and Dupre were both very strongly influenced by Constable, though, of course, they did not imitate him. They possessed plenty of individuality, and this influence under which they painted was, under the circumstances, of a most healthy nature. It introduced elements of strength and freshness into French art which it had not possessed before, and had a positively vivifying influence. Corot and Constable differ in the quality of their strength, and that difference is a most fascinating study."

"What is your opinion, Mr. Hart, of what are termed 'Schools' of Art? Do you believe that Art gains anything from the development of a French, a Düsseldorf, or a Munich 'School' of painting?"

"Most emphatically I do not. I consider it a pitiable condition of affairs when the existence of a 'school of painting' becomes evident. A 'school' of this kind is the bane of originality. A master will never produce the same evil effect upon a student that the 'school,' which the master represents, will extend. One is likely to gain a great deal from an artist without necessarily acquiring the academic stupidities founded upon his method; but the man who simply follows the school or method only weakens himself as he persists in it. The followers, in this country, of the old Düsseldorf School ought to serve as a 'frightful example' of

the pernicious effect of following a contemporary fashion in art.

"A great deal of the academic instruction of the day teaches the student how to paint rather than how to represent. When one represents, he thinks. When one simply paints, he performs, in a great measure, a mechanical function. Conventionality is the great bane of the art schools. Insistence upon a particular way of doing a thing is most deplorable for real art. This academic conventionality continually makes itself evident in men without a particle of ability, who go abroad and send home strikingly suggestive pictures, but who, after they return to America, can only weakly imitate what they have done abroad, and paint us dismal platitudes. We often search in vain to discover a man who astonished us by his work three years ago. What has become of him? He has gone and has left nothing behind him.

"The desire to imitate is the beginning of art, but after a man lays claim to being an artist, we expect him to stop mere slavish imitation alone, and tell us what he sees. We do not want him to tell us what another man sees. Art critics should make their starting point on the insistence of this in the beginning, for upon this everything hinges. Before men have thrown off the shackles, so to speak, of their masters, and are able to tell how things have impressed them as individuals, they are in the position of students merely, and should not, for a moment, be dignified by the name of artists.

"We are vexed a great deal by the utter lack of knowledge on the part of many art writers in this city, in this very direction. They give men credit for being our greatest artists who are nothing but copyists—and poor copyists at that! I do not intimate that these men connive with the writers, but a man knows when he copies Monticelli, for instance, that he is not doing honest work; that he is not painting his own impressions of what he sees, and I have no hesitation in characterizing such a man as a fraud in every sense of the word. When we read of such men being the true apostles of art in this country, it seems as though we must be on the descending scale. The better the monkey, the greater the artist!

"If a man is destitute of the ability to create anything, it is his misfortune, and if he experiences pleasure in making imitations of the work of other men, there can be no possible objection to his doing it, only we should not dignify his performances by calling them works of art, and when writers, from ignorance or something worse, laud such men to the skies as great artists, it is no wonder that the papers have so little influence in such matters.

"No great artist is a copyist, and no man of real power will hold very long to the characteristics or mannerisms of his master. Van Dyck was a pupil of



THE POET OF NATURE.

AN ODE TO THE SPIDER

BY THE POET OF NATURE.

Wiggly, waggly, crawling thing,
 Dangling from thy silken string,
 Canst a moral lesson bring
 With thy poison and thy sting,
 Given thee for thy defence,
 Oft misused from ignorance,
 On the careless urchin's toe
 Inflicting dire red spot of woe,
 Or upon his wayward heel
 Thy dread power to make him feel?
 But thou hast thy dangers too,
 Slim waisted wasp gets sight of you,
 And with her more potent *stingem*—
 "Thence sir spider!—I shall bring him,
 To my little narrow cell,
 He will suit my purpose well."
 Thence no retreat for thee to hie
 For thou must creep, but she will fly.
 So goes the world, my subtle spider,
 Within thy narrow range, or wider
 Breadth of space or length of life,
 Matters nothing in the strife.
 The world is full of venom'd stingers,
 Serpents, flirts and scandal flingers,
 Wasps, hornets, almost everything
 Living, will contrive to sting.

W. H. B.

Rubens, but he did not paint like him; Gerome studied under Delaroche, but his pictures do not, in the least, resemble those of his master.

"When the art student, who has been abroad, returns to his own country, if he is a man with any strength of purpose, he will go at once to Nature, and apply, in his own way, the principles he has learned abroad, leaving 'method' to care for and develop itself. If he is a weak man, and clings to the characteristics of his master, he will become weaker and weaker as his impressions of the master gradually fade away from him, until, finally, we shall lose sight of him altogether.

"I tell you individuality is the great thing in art! No matter how humble an artist's work may be, let it show his own study and communion with Nature, and it will possess a value far above that of the most exact copy or imitation of the work of any great man.

"It is very pleasant, too, for one who is familiar with art, to walk into an exhibition gallery and be able to pick out pictures that he can feel acquainted with without the introduction given by a catalogue, though he may never have seen them before. No matter in what form a man's individuality may display itself, when you have once learned its character you always may recognize it, and no signature is necessary. And where

there is this individuality, you may recognize it in the merest charcoal sketch, the rough wood-cut, or the commonest reproduction. You cannot kill it, however feebly you may undertake to reproduce it. No one can mistake the individuality of Claude, Turner, Titian, Raphael, Rousseau, Diaz, or Troyon, seen through the most ordinary reproduction.

"But when I go into an exhibition and see picture after picture illustrating simply a phase of the French school or the Munich school, or the ultra impressionistic school, containing no individually characteristic work, I feel sad; my visit is not a pleasure to me, and my recollection afterward of this mass of dreary verisimilitude is as the memory of a very commonplace hash."

NEXT MONTH.

In the February number of THE ART UNION, J. R. Lambdin will tell how Thomas Sully came to paint a portrait of Queen Victoria, A. J. Conant will discourse on the Æstheticism of the Bible, there will be a descriptive article on the National Academy Schools—with a conversation with Professor Wilmarth on Art Instruction—besides papers on Art Criticism and other matters of interest.